

CCC INTERVIEW WITH JOHN C HENDRIX

Includes additional narrative provided by Mr. Hendrix

Date: February 11, 2003

Interviewer: Mr. Hendrix completed the interview form and sent to Larry Wilson

DNR: Where was your hometown?

John: Edgerton, Missouri. This is near Kansas City.

DNR: How old were you when you enrolled?

John: I was 16.

Narrative: Actually I went into the CCC camps back in 1937 out in Sun Valley, Idaho. At that point I learned how to drive a truck, matter of fact became a truck master, did garage work and just general forestry type activities around there.

DNR: What did you do before joining the camp?

John: I was a farmer. I had completed three years of high school.

DNR: Why did you enroll in the CCC program?

John: To help support my mother and two younger sisters. The drought and grasshoppers were hard on farming. I wanted to see other places. I spent six months in the CCCs in Idaho and then came home and finished high school, then went back to the CCCs.

Narrative: That was back in the times of the drought and life was rough on the farm and I was 16 year old kid looking after my mother and 2 younger sisters and a 60 acre farm. Had to help get some cash coming in from somewhere. I came back from Idaho, finished my high school senior year and then went back into the CCC at Keosauqua.

DNR: What CCC camps were you assigned to:

John: Keosauqua

DNR: Were you ever transferred?

John: Once in Iowa I spent 18 months there.

DNR: When did you work in the camp?

John: October 10, 1938 to March 25, 1940.

DNR: Tell me about your first days at the camp

John: We were issued a full scope of clothing and a foot locker to keep clean clothes in. They had to be neatly folded in a specific manner. We had soap, towels and other miscellaneous items (everything we needed).

Narrative: We were issued a full folding locker to keep it in and a place out in the entryway for hanging up clothes that needed to be hung up. We were in regular military type barracks. So I don't remember how many there were to a barracks.

It was just one story barracks. There were several of them. I think there were about 200 of us there in the camp as I recall.

DNR: What personal items did you have when you arrived?

John: Just the clothes I was wearing.

DNR: What were you not allowed to keep?

John: That depended on the inspector. We had weekly stand-by inspections and he would let you know what to get rid of.

Narrative: That was pretty much up to the captain that was in charge of the camp. We had weekly Saturday morning inspections and sometimes you weren't sure until he went through and looked through your stuff and found something in there that he didn't think you should have and you had to get rid of it. These were just regular wooden barrack, open ceilings, etc. We had a stove in each end. I believe they burn coal in there. We had to keep those polished, had a black polish and vinegar and boy those things had to shine. If you got them too hot, they'd leave a little burn spot and when the inspector came through you better not have that burn spot showing. You better have that covered with the black stuff.

DNR: How were you assigned lodging?

John: We were put in regular military style wooden barracks.

DNR: Who supplied the bedding and sleepwear?

John: This all came from the CCC supply.

DNR: Who were your bunkmates?

John: Tip Simpson was the barracks chief. Others were Bill Roberts, Baker, Babe and Duck Hendrix (no relation), Blackie Young, Pullium, many others.

Narrative: A guy names Tip Simpson was my barracks chief. I remember there was a Bill Roberts, a guy named Baker, couple of cousin that were no relation to me but was Babe Hendrix and Duck Hendrix, a guy named Blackie Young, Pullium who was the bulldozer operator who taught me later to drive the cab in the bulldozer. Many other I don't remember all their names now. I know that Bill Roberts was one of my best buddies.

DNR: How did you guys get along?

John: There was very little trouble but a lot of mischief like short sheeting and dumping beds.

Narrative: As far as getting along with the guys, I don't remember any real problems at all. There were a few little minor things, but things would always work out. Nothing of a serious nature that I can think of at all except that we had a Baker on night shift and he was using barbiturates and he was just sort of goofy and we'd give him a bad time about it. He kept telling us if we didn't quit teasing him he was going pee in the pudding. It seems that the mess officer went in one night and he was peeing in the pudding. I hope that was the first time. He wasn't around there the next day. He was gone.

DNR: How was the food in the mess hall?

John: I thought it was very good. Well prepared, plenty of it and a good variety.

DNR: Who did the cooking?

John: The CCC boys.

Narrative: I think I had to work KP maybe one or two times, but I was doing other activities and wasn't eligible for KP. The CCC boys did all of the cooking. I don't think there were any LEMs in the cooking end of it at all.

DNR: How were the holiday meals?

John: I don't have any bad memories so they must have been okay.

Narrative: I had no complaints about the meals at all. I thought they were very well planned and laid out and well cooked, prepared so I had no qualms about that part of it.

DNR: When was payday and how much did you earn?

John: We got paid \$30.00 once a month.

Narrative: We were paid \$30.00 a month and I believe I got to keep \$9.00 (I think it was) and the \$21.00 went home to my mother to take of her and the 2 girls. Of course, in those days a job in the town/city, if you made \$12 to \$15 a week, you were making pretty good money. So things were a lot different back then then they are right now.

DNR: How did you spend your pay?

John: As I recall, \$21.00 went home and a lot of my \$9.00 went to the roller skating rink. I think we had some civilian clothes too.

DNR: When were your days off and how did you spend them?

John: I think we had Saturday and Sunday off. We played baseball, boxing, wrestling, tumbling and dated local girls, did some hiking and just enjoying life.

Narrative: As far as days off, I don't think we worked most Saturdays. Some Saturdays we had to work but we were always off on Sundays. And they had various church activities and little groups and things like that. My buddies and myself usually had some girlfriends downtown, at least some friends downtown and we'd go out hiking in the park and various odd things that way. It was almost like we were just back in our hometowns.

DNR: How was the Sabbath observed?

John: They held church services each Sunday

DNR: Did you have sport activities in the camp?

John: Baseball, boxing, wrestling, tumbling.

Narrative: As far as sports activities in camp, I know we had baseball, boxing, wrestling, tumbling. Our tumbling, we had what they call ICC mattresses which

was issue condemned. So we'd get some of those old condemned mattresses and lay them out and do our tumbling on those.

DNR: What part did you take in them?

John: I was active, had some bumps and bruises but it was fun.

DNR: Did you have any person conflicts with others in the camp?

John: I can't remember any conflicts of any significance. We had a real variety of guys (even parolees) but few conflicts.

Narrative: I really didn't have any personal conflicts. There was one case I'll get to it later on, but out in the nursery, we were working out there and one of the guys, just horsing around one day, he was throwing some rocks, a guy names Blackie Young. He was from the north end of Kansas City and really a pretty rough character. He was tossing some rocks and hit the outhouse. I came out of the outhouse and poked my head around the corner and one of those rocks caught me over the left eye. I had a nice little scar up there where that hit. But Blackie, he wasn't liked very well and they were trying to get me to tell them that he hit me and I said No, I opened the door and rammed into the door. Anyway from that day on, if I needed any support of any kind, Blackie was there to support me. So I didn't see that as any great problem.

DNR: If there were problems among the men, how were they resolved?

John: If they were very serious you could be discharged. If minor, you got extra duty.

Narrative: If it was something really bad, you were just discharged and that was it. But usually what you had was extra duty or KP duty or something of this nature. But the work that I was doing I really wasn't too much involved in the camp activities. I was out in the field most all the time.

DNR: Did you take advantage of any education or trade opportunities being taught?

John: Yes, believe it or not I taught a class in how to read and write.

Narrative: For myself, I had graduated from high school, and we had guys from southeast Missouri, of course a lot of them were from Iowa also but we had a bunch from southeast Missouri. And some of those guys from the hills down there couldn't even read and write. They had me teaching reading and writing to some of them. And we had various classes that we could take on our own and I've got a bunch of yellow certificates that I got. It was all sorts of things of interest, to help out and learn a little bit more about like forestry for example. I was thinking about going in as a ranger at one time.

I started out working in the garage and then they had a service station, so I had the job of keeping all the vehicles serviced and fully gassed and oil checks and all this sort of stuff. I kept after them that I wanted to drive the caterpillar because I had done a little of it when I was a night owl. Finally, the superintendent of the forestry, called me one day and said let's go for a ride. So we went out to the big building in the nursery and there was a CAT sitting there, a small caterpillar about 35 horse. He said okay, climb on and back it out. I said Hell I've never driven one

and he said back it out anyway. I backed it out and went out into the park by the bathhouse and lake and I became a catskinner then and bulldozer operator. And later we were working around Farmington and I don't remember the names of the other towns now, but we were planting trees and one of my jobs was to take the Cat and we had surveyors for site level and they'd set a course and we would dig furrows around that course to keep the water from all washing away and have a place to plant the trees. I didn't get involved in any of the tree planting itself actually but there was a lot of it. I was on the CAT all the time. We also would clean out the forest and we would drag logs out of the forest to clean it up and get the logs out. I've got some pictures of that. I got the CAT buried a couple times in the spring when it started to thaw, if you broke through that frozen crust it got a little messy down underneath and had a little trouble getting the CAT out of it again. They were planting trees all down through the southeastern part of Iowa – Donnellson was one of them.

DNR: Who were our teachers and where were classes held?

John: Taught by forest rangers and LEMs, in the camp.

DNR: What benefits did you get out of these classes at camp or after leaving camp?

John: Nothing toward a college degree but in general, learned to work with others, and I learned history, math and took some trade classes.

DNR: What were some of the main projects your camp was involved in?

John: Soil conservation, tree planting, quarry work, rock facing work, building roads, spreading gravel on roads, building the stone bathhouse at Lacey-Keosauqua State Park and clearing forest.

Narrative: Tree planting, rock quarry out toward the Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, where they had the bath house and the lake out there they had a rock quarry also. There was rock facing and then we were laying rock for a culver, we were doing limestone, setting it in. You can see some of that still out there. Of course I drove a truck and worked the garage and catskinner. Oh, we were building roads and I drove a dump truck for awhile graveling the roads. Of course the compass surveying activities. I worked right directly with a guy named Smitty, a forest ranger. It was sort of comical, he was newly married and Smitty every lunch we'd have one jam sandwich and one meat sandwich. Smitty would put mustard on everything. A couple of week or so after his new baby was born, Smitty quit using mustard, and we started kidding him about it. But he said if you changed as many diapers as I have you wouldn't want to see yellow again anyway. So he quit putting mustard on everything.

DNR: What were some of your duties?

John: Driving trucks, worked in the garage, "cat skinner". I drove a Caterpillar to build roads and clear forest of deadwood.

DNR: What type of skills did you receive?

John: I did compass surveying work, cat skinner operation, general forest maintenance and learning to work with others.

DNR: Who trained you?

John: LEMs, rangers and other CCC men.

DNR: Who were your leaders?

John: A ranger names "Smitty", Tars Simpson, and a LEM in the garage. I had my own crew in the woods.

Narrative: The LEMs , local experience men, there was the rangers and in the garage I know there was a couple of LEMs there. I can't think of their names right now but a lot of the mechanical work and the higher level of labor and so forth was handled pretty much by these guys and of course out in the nursery I think most of that was LEMs but I'm not sure there. But they were all a good bunch of guys to work with. I really enjoyed it. Some of the names – Tars Simpson, I think he was a CCC but maybe later he became an LEM but he was Tip's brother. He also worked the garage and was a top mechanic doing overall and had a machine shop that he worked on. I think he's retired from the Keosauqua area but he was working for the highway department when I was through there about 10 years ago.

DNR: How did you get along with them?

John: Very well. When I wanted to expand to other types of work I was always helped to start.

DNR: How did you get your daily work assignments?

John: I was usually on a crew where we had a continuous line of work to do.

Narrative: I had my own crew out in the woods. As the catskinner, I had the guys that I worked with and I was more or less in charge. I never made leader or assistant leader at it but I was responsible for getting the guys out there and getting the work done and coming back in.

DNR: Who were some of your fellow workers:

John: The only name I remember is Lloyd Bottoms. He was my assistant on the "Cat" and he was very reckless. I had to hold a tight rein at times.

Narrative: I remember my assistant on the CAT was a guy named Lloyd Bottoms. I had a pretty tight rein on him because he'd get a little reckless. He almost turned the Cat over a couple of times and I had to sit pretty tight on him. I understood that after I left that he eventually ran the cat over the ledge and it's still sitting there according to what I was told.

DNR: Have you had any contact with your fellow CCC workers?

John: About ten years ago I visited Keosauqua and met Tars Simpson and his wife. My wife and I had a very enjoyable visit.

DNR: How did the city kids and the country kids get along?

John: There were very few problems.

Narrative: We had no problems at all there. I think all of us were dating girls in town and I never heard any gripping or complaining, it seemed everything went along real well.

DNR: Were there any minority groups working in the camp?

John: There was a Native American named Blackie Young.

DNR: How was he treated by his superiors?

John: The same as everyone else.

DNR: How was he treated by his fellow workers?

John: Blackie was from a very tough part of Kansas City and he usually received proper respect.

DNR: Tell me about the specific skills you learned in camp.

John: I enjoyed the skills I picked up but went into aircraft work. I think the experience of how to work with different types has been a great help.

Narrative: I saw no big problems. The rangers were very helpful teaching us various techniques and methods. Just like when I got on the CAT, nobody taught me, they just said take it out to the bath house and on the way out there I didn't know that you could ride the breaks so to speak, I thought you just give it a short jerk and turn it a little bit. When I got out there, here come the head guy, came out asking what I was doing. Every place I'd hit that thing it would dig up a little blacktop and tracks would leave their marks. So I learned to keep a steady hand on it and not to make quick turns with it.

DNR: How did these benefit you after leaving the camp?

John: Working and living close to others was a great help when I went into the Air Corps and after I went into industry.

Narrative: One thing about my experience in the CCCs, it put me in a much better position when I went into the military. I joined the Air Force after I got out of camp there and was in WWII 4 years, 10 months, 11 days. My experience working with people and with the head guys at the CCC camps were military officers, so it gave me a little better understanding of the situation there. I think it really helped me tremendously in fitting into general life and gave me skills, of course I learned, out in Idaho I learned the gas welding and also spray painting, we had to spray paint all the forestry trucks because they were getting pretty well beaten up.

DNR: Were there any injuries at work?

John: Very few and all minor.

DNR: How would injuries be taken care of?

John: I believe they only required first aid.

Narrative: We had our own dispensary there and I don't remember any serious injuries, but I'm sure that the local medical staff would take care of anything if we needed anything further. No I was never injured, no serious injuries of any kind. As far as diseases at the camp and how they were treated – I don't remember any medical problems at the camp. There may have been some but I don't remember any of them.

DNR: Were you ever injured?

John: No.

DNR: What diseases occurred in camp?

John: None that I know of.

DNR: Any insect and rodent problems?

John: None that I remember.

Narrative: Here again, I don't remember anything there even when we were out in the woods, planting trees and clearing out forests, I don't remember anything unusual. Of course, I was raised on a farm so I was at home in that atmosphere.

DNR: What work did you do outside the camp or in the community?

John: I played baseball.

DNR: Were you paid?

John: No. No, we were never paid for any of that.

DNR: What contacts did you have in the outside community?

John: I dated several girls.

Narrative: We dated several of the girls and we spent a lot of time at the skating rink down in Keosauqua. They had a roller skating rink on the second floor and we used to spend a lot of time down there. There were a couple of girls there that I dated quite a lot. There was one girl, this is just a comical little side light. My name is John and I was running around with a guy named John Robinson. He was dating a school teacher from Dowds, her name was Josephine. At that time there was 3 songs that were real popular and we heard those so many times that we were ready to blow up. But it was "Oh Johnny", "An Apple for Teacher" and "Josephine". And everywhere we went one or all of those three songs would start playing. It got a little boring after awhile but nothing serious.

DNR: Were there fellowship types of organizations that you or others attended at camp or in the community?

John: None that I know of.

Narrative: I had no dealings with any of them, so I couldn't make any comment there.

DNR: You mentioned that you dated girls while you were at the camp?

John: Yes.

DNR: Were there any problems with the young men in the community:

John: None that I ever heard of.

Narrative: Other than the guys that I met out at the nursery and the labor crews, they had some civilians and some prisoners working out in the park doing some of the building out there, but it was a normal mix as far as I was concerned. I saw no problems between the community and the CCCs. Now out in Idaho, it was different story. We used to go up to Fairfield, they had a camp up there and we had rivalry wrestling between the 2 camps. But in general I thought we were treated very well.

DNR: How did the local community feel about the CCC boys?

John: I feel that we were treated very well in Keosauqua.

DNR: What is your most memorable experience at the CCC camp?

John: It was a learning experience that I enjoyed very much.

Narrative: It gave me a pretty broad picture that helped me later in life, there's no question about that.

DNR: Any strange or odd experiences in camp?

John: I broke an axle on the "Cat" in a gully in snow and very cold weather. We had to repair it right there.

Narrative: I broke an axle on the caterpillar over by Farmington. We were way down in a gully and in the middle of the winter, colder than hell, snow on the ground and we couldn't fix it without taking the whole differential out and the only way we could get it out of there was to put on a scope shovel and tie a rope on the handle of the scope shovel and then we'd get up to a tree and pull it up there. Somebody would hold it or we'd anchor it and then we'd go up as far as the rope would allow us and that's the way we finally got that truck up to the top of the hill so we could take it in and get it repaired and bring it back. But it was so damn cold and the grease was so thick in there from the coldness that we had a terrible time getting it out and back in. But we managed to accomplish it and get it taken care of.

DNR: What do you consider your biggest accomplishment at the camp?

John: Helping build the state park and tree planting?

DNR: How was your life changed by enrolling the CCCs?

John: It changed so much that I would like to see it used today but I am told that it takes work away from the local population.

Narrative: I would like to see it used today. I think that these boys in town that have never been able to get out and do anything except join the gangs and so forth that it would do them a tremendous amount of good to get into something like this. But the problems that I understood at the time, and I've heard since then is that the problem there is CCCs were taking work away from the local people. There supposedly was friction from that standpoint. I never encountered it myself but these were the stories that I was told afterwards.

DNR: What did you do after leaving the CCC?

John: I spent five years in the Army Air Corps, the 31 years at Northrop Aircraft which covered WWII and the space exploration years. I retired from Northrop in 1977 and for the past 25 years have done considerable world traveling with my wife. This made possible by good real estate investments.

Narrative: I was involved in the building of, at time it was the world's fastest surface vehicle, it was the Air Force rocket sled. It got up to 643 miles an hour. I worked for Northrop, and we subbed out work for making the big 747's, all the way from the 707, 727, 737, etc. If you've ridden on any of those I was connected with it in some way and the testing of the different parts as they were doing the design work on them.

The last 25 years my wife and I decided that we were going to do a little traveling, so we've been within 200 miles of any spot in the continental US. We've never visited Alaska, but all the other 49 state. We've been in 5 of the continents, We haven't been to Anartica or Asia, but we've done a lot of traveling and enjoyed it very much.